

On Behalf of Resurrection: A Second Reply to Cavin and Colombetti

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Abstract: *This essay is a reply to “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis” by Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos Colombetti. In it, I establish what natural laws are, what a miracle is, and how “naturalism” and “supernaturalism” differ as worldviews. Cavin and Colombetti argue that if the Standard Model of particle physics (SM) is true, then the resurrection of Jesus did not occur and physical things can only causally interact with other physical things. I argue that neither point follows.*

Keywords: Standard Model, Particle Physics, Resurrection, Robert Greg Cavin, Carlos A. Colombetti, Naturalism, Supernaturalism

I

Let me begin with some metaphysical assumptions with which I approach the question of miracles and thus the resurrection of Jesus. As human beings experience the world, we observe certain natural regularities. Day follows night, light moves faster than sound, things tend to fall toward earth. Some such regularities we call natural laws. A natural law is simply a description of the way the natural world repeatedly behaves.¹ Natural laws are human inventions—ways of describing uniformities that we observe in the world. They do not cause things to happen. As human inventions, they are abstract objects and hence causally effete. They describe what has regularly and uniformly happened in the past, as far as we know, and thus what we can expect to happen in the future. A true law of nature correctly describes what regularly, naturally, and uniformly happens.

Let us say that one such law of nature is gravity. Defining this term in a common sense and even simplistic way, we can say that gravity is a natural phenomenon in which all things with mass or energy are physically drawn

¹ There are other views of natural laws that I find less persuasive; e.g., Armstrong’s necessitarianism. See D. M. Armstrong, *What Is a Law of Nature?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139171700>.

toward each other. Near the earth, gravity describes the observed fact that things that are heavier than air—when left unsupported in the air—tend to move toward the center of the earth.

But *why* is gravity true? Why is it that physical objects tend to fall? One possibility is to say that this is simply the way that things naturally behave and that is the end of the story.² “Naturalism” is a metaphysical worldview that roughly says: (1) The only thing that exists is the physical universe (i.e., there are no non-physical entities like spirits, souls, gods, or God). (2) Every event that occurs can, in principle, be explained in terms used in the natural sciences (i.e., there are no miracles, permanent anomalies, or inexplicable mysteries). And (3) true natural laws, whatever they turn out to be, always hold.

As a theist, I reject naturalism in favor of “supernaturalism.” This worldview holds: (1) The physical universe exists because God—an omnipotent and non-physical being—brought it into existence, along with all true natural laws. (2) God has the ability and perhaps occasionally the intention to bring about events that, apart from God, would not naturally have occurred; they are usually called miracles. (3) Accordingly, not all phenomena can be explained in purely scientific terms; some occurrences can only be explained by the activity of God.³

What exactly are miracles? That is a controversial and much-discussed question in the philosophy of religion. Cavin and Colombetti seem to understand a miracle as God interacting with the world, which of course they insist never happens. I will accept that basic definition, amplified only slightly: a miracle is God intervening in the natural order to bring about an event that apart from God’s intervention would not otherwise have occurred. It is but a short step to say that a miracle amounts to God violating one or more natural laws.⁴ So I will understand a miracle as Richard Swinburne does,⁵ i.e., as a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law that is brought about by God.

² There are deeper explanations of gravity in physics, but I am going to ignore them because they are not relevant to my argument.

³ I realize that there are other worldviews than these. Some people, for example, believe in God and creation but in virtually all other respects are naturalists. They are usually called deists.

⁴ Theistic philosophers have tried out other notions of miracles; e.g., Michael Murray’s Leibnizian suggestion that events like the resurrection were frontloaded by God into the creation and so do not require any natural law to be violated. But for simplicity’s sake, I will stick with the older idea.

⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, New Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00776-9>.

The law of nature in question will then be understood as a regularity that virtually always holds.

Most supernaturalists believe that miracles are extraordinarily rare. My own view is that this rarity is very much in the interests of both God and human beings. If they are rare, then even if there are occasional miracles, natural laws will still stand (do not need to be revised) and the enterprise of science can continue.

II

Greg Cavin and Carlos Colombetti have been arguing against the Christian claim that Jesus was raised from the dead.⁶ I replied to their argument in my, “Craig on the Resurrection: A Defense.”⁷ Most recently, C&C (as I will call them, with no disrespect whatsoever intended) have replied to my essay. Their article is called, “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis.”⁸ Their argument focuses not on gravity but on the Standard Model (SM) of particle physics, a theory that classifies all known elementary particles and describes three of the four fundamental forces that physicists describe (electromagnetic, weak, and strong). They argue, quite correctly, that SM is strongly confirmed in contemporary physics. Most importantly, they further argue that if SM is true, the resurrection of Jesus did not occur. But despite all the sound and fury (and the extraordinary length) of their reply, I do not find the case that they make at all plausible.

The present paper is in response to their arguments. I will not reply to all of them; that would perhaps require over fifty pages from me, as well.⁹ I

⁶ Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, “Assessing the Resurrection Hypothesis: Problems with Craig’s Inference to the Best Explanation,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 205–28, [dx.doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2836](https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2836).

⁷ Stephen T. Davis, “Craig on the Resurrection: A Defense,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 28–35, [http://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.03](https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.03).

⁸ Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37–94, [http://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.04](https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.04).

⁹ In particular, in the interest of brevity, I will not respond to C&C’s lengthy arguments against the idea of a non-interference proviso to natural laws, nor to their arguments against the reliability of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels.

will first respond to what I take to be their two central arguments, and then deal with two other points.¹⁰

I will get to their main arguments momentarily, but first I should mention several points that C&C emphasize but that, so far as I can see, are not an issue between us at all.

- Of course, I agree that if true natural laws always hold—i.e., if naturalism is true—then there are no miracles and thus no resurrection of Jesus.
- Of course, if naturalism is true, any naturalistic explanation of an event or phenomenon is superior to any supernaturalistic one.
- Of course, SM—when spelled out by physicists—does not contain any supernatural non-interference proviso, just as the rudimentary definition of gravity mentioned above says nothing about, “unless God intervenes.”¹¹
- Of course, SM never mentions causal relationships between physical things and non-physical things; it is, after all, a physical theory.
- Of course, the equations of SM never yield supernatural results.
- Of course, it does not follow by itself that if no naturalistic explanation of the (alleged) resurrection of Jesus holds water, then the thesis that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead is rendered probable.
- Of course, it follows that if God never supernaturally causes Mars and Kepler-186f to switch places, then those two items do not switch places.

III

What exactly are the main arguments of C&C? The first is that SM entails that Jesus was not raised from the dead. The second argument is that only physical things can causally interact with physical things. The two arguments are closely related.

¹⁰ I had originally intended that “Craig on the Resurrection: A Defense” would be my last word on this subject. But when one’s ten-page paper elicits a response of over fifty pages in which one is accused of making a weak case, contradicting oneself, begging the question, constructing “straw men,” being evasive and inaccurate, ignoring the obvious, misunderstanding C&C’s arguments, and simply skipping over inconvenient facts, it tends to get one back up.

¹¹ But for theists, there is always a proviso, not part of the natural law itself, to the effect that God has the ability to cause things to happen that could not have been predicted by the natural law.

On the first point, C&C hold that “SM entails that God does not cause SM to be false” (p. 58). They also say: “Since this states that God does not cause *L* [any law of nature] to be false *simpliciter*, it thereby entails that God does not cause *L* to be false in *any* way and, thus, that he does not cause it to be false *supernaturally* or *miraculously*” (p. 58). Sure. As long as gravity holds, God does not cause gravity not to hold. As just noted, occasional miracles, if they occur, do not cause natural laws to be false in the sense of no longer being natural laws. The point is that they could not have predicted the miraculous event in question. I simply point out that “God does not cause SM to be false” does not imply “God does not raise Jesus from the dead.”

C&C cite my agreement that SM is not, in itself, naturalistic metaphysics. They go on to say that accordingly “[Davis] must also agree with our conclusion that it is *impossible* and therefore *maximally implausible on SM* that God supernaturally interferes (or intervenes) in that realm—a realm that includes corpses” (p. 59). But then we wonder: Where did that italicized modal term “impossible” suddenly come from? How did it get into the mix? Is the statement, $\sim P \Rightarrow \Box \sim P$ true? *P* is false therefore *P* is impossible? That surely does not make sense.

But perhaps C&C mean not *logically* impossible but something like *nomologically* impossible. Some purported event is nomologically impossible if it violates one or more true laws of nature. If true natural laws always hold, then miracles are nonlogically impossible. Indeed, C&C explain that by the words “impossible,” they mean something like “epistemically improbable.” My own view is that their word “impossible” (on pages 59 and 60) is an odd term to use in this context, especially by two philosophers. Perhaps they just mean “impossible” in the sense that SM does not allow it. But that is no problem, at least according to believers in the resurrection. As noted, our view is that an omnipotent being has the ability to bring about events that apart from divine intervention would not naturally occur. For example, God can override or contravene gravity and allow Jesus to walk on water.

Do the propositions and equations of SM state or entail not just that SM holds but that SM *always* holds (in the sense of never being violated)? Do they state or entail that SM is *immutable*? Can C&C cite that point in the literature of SM? (I do not mean the literature *about* SM, to which C&C have been making contributions). Do we know that there never was a moment in the past and never will be a moment in the future when SM did not or will not hold? To insist that natural laws *always* hold is to say that no intervening God exists. That claim is not science but naturalistic metaphysics. But C&C do, in fact, insist on this very point; indeed, it is the heart of their argument. They

say, “SM entails that God *never* supernaturally intervenes in the affairs of the universe that lie within its scope” (p. 67; italics in original). But, again, that point is based on naturalism, not science. It is not part of SM, despite all their talk about negative implications of SM.

Suppose that God has never in the past performed a miracle. Suppose further that no one has ever even *claimed* that God set aside a natural law and brought about an event that otherwise would not have occurred. It still would not follow that a miracle will never occur or that it is *impossible* for God to perform a miracle tomorrow.

IV

C&C’s second argument, that only physical things can causally interact with physical things, proceeds on similar grounds.¹² Again, C&C emphasize the point that the propositions and equations of SM nowhere talk about such causal relationships. I believe that this is quite so. The events, states, entities, properties, and relations that appear in the equations of SM are all physical. There are no references to the supernatural in SM. The claim that Jesus was raised, they insist, is not a “natural output” of SM (p. 65). And that claim is certainly true.

But then our two critics go on to say that “it is precisely because of this” that SM entails that only physical things can causally interact with physical things (p. 61, 63). They say that SM shows that the outcome of Jesus’ death is natural, not supernatural, i.e., he permanently died, and his body decomposed. But does this, as C&C claim, immediately follow (p. 63)? It does not. “There are no references to the supernatural in SM” does not entail “There are no supernatural events” or even the notion that “Jesus was not supernaturally raised by God” (p. 64).

Let us switch from SM to gravity. Note this argument: “Gravity only applies to physical things; ergo there are no interactions between physical things and non-physical things.” Does that follow? Of course not. Again, SM only implies what C&C say it does when allied with naturalism. I do not know what C&C’s beliefs about the existence of God are. They seem generously willing to entertain for the sake of argument the possibility that an omnipotent God exists. And they own that they do “not deny the existence of a non-physical realm that includes God” (p. 89). If God is omnipotent, they admit

¹² Incidentally, all mind/body dualists (like me) would reject this claim out of hand. But one presumes that Cavin and Colombetti are physicalists, so I will not push this argument further, although I would love to do so.

that God *could* violate SM. But they think SM implies that God never does so. God always chooses to refrain from acting in the world; God always chooses not to interact. Perhaps, they say, this is because God sees that it would not be a good thing for God to intervene (p. 86).

It is interesting to me that in order to argue that there are no miracles, even on the possibility that an omnipotent God exists, C&C eschew philosophy of science and move to doing some theology.¹³ It would have been even more interesting had they pushed their theology a bit farther and explained *why* it would be better for God never to intervene than to intervene.

V

Of many other slightly lesser issues that I could deal with here, I will discuss only two. First, Christian tradition holds that Jesus' resurrection body was transformed into what Paul calls a *soma pneumatikon* (roughly a "spiritual body"). Much ink has been spilled in Christian thought over what that term means. Clearly, it is still a body, i.e., a physical object that can be seen, touched, heard, located, and moves at a certain velocity. Yet it is a body with strange new properties as well, like being able to materialize in a room and later disappear, being imperishable, etc. C&C argue that such a thing would violate SM and is thus impossible. It conflicts with the notion of physicality—"a temporary group of coordinated oscillations in various quantum fields" (p. 67)—presupposed in SM. What believers in the resurrection have here—so C&C say—is a new sense of a word "physical," different from what is presupposed in SM. But then this sort of body, they say, "cannot provide the senses with the kind of inputs they *require*, for sight, sound, touch, etc..." (p. 92). But how do they know that? They even argue that a "spiritual body" that Christians have in mind would have to be ontologically *sui generis* (p. 67).¹⁴

But I reply that creating a "spiritual body" is something that an omnipotent being can do. Keep in mind that Christians traditionally hold that an omnipotent being can do or bring about anything that is not logically impossible, anything that does not imply a contradiction.¹⁵ But an omnipotent

¹³ Which they also do on page 68, where they seem to claim that certain theological questions related to the problem of evil can only be answered by SM.

¹⁴ I do not know what this means. Perhaps it means not a body and not a non-bodily spirit but something else.

¹⁵ See Stephen T. Davis, "Cartesian Omnipotence," *Philosophia Christi* 19, no. 2 (2017): 455–61, <http://doi.org/10.5840/pc201719236>.

being can bring about things that are *nomologically* impossible. There is no doubt that such a “spiritual body” would be highly unusual, but C&C have not shown that it is logically impossible. God can make a body that has both the physical properties Jesus’ resurrection body is reported as having and the unusual “spiritual” properties as well.

It seems to me that C&C’s arguments amount to their simply *insisting* that the notion of the spiritual body makes no sense. It is quite true that ordinary bodies—the kinds described in SM—are not imperishable, nor do they have the ability to materialize or dematerialize. It is a matter of indifference to me whether, as C&C insist (p. 92), we have two different senses of the word “physical” at work here. As long as the Jesus’ resurrection body can be seen, touched, located, etc., that point will not matter. But I see no reason why that is ruled out.¹⁶

C&C assert that Jesus’ body in the resurrection accounts “leaves the physical universe” (p. 67). Some theologians believe that the accounts of the ascension of Jesus in Luke and Acts entail that idea, and that may be so. I am not totally convinced of the point. But even if the spiritual body of Jesus does leave the physical universe (for heaven, perhaps), that is something that an omnipotent being can bring about. The ascension of Jesus, on this view, was primarily a change of state rather than a change of location. Jesus changed from being present in the realm of space and time to being in the realm of eternity, in the transcendent heavenly realm. I will merely add that philosophers and theologians alike, quite apart from theological considerations, have discussed models that involve passing from one space-time manifold to another, and such a concept seems to be coherent.¹⁷

C&C also say that God, who is spirit, “lacks energy” (p. 79). I agree that as a non-physical being, God does not have energy; but God created energy out of nothing when he said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) and interacts with it. If God has no access to energy, how did God create the

¹⁶ C&C are quite mistaken when they describe one possible Christian theology of the spiritual body as amounting to reincarnation (see Cavin and Colombetti, “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power,” 57n35). Reincarnation is the theory that at death, one’s immaterial essence (“*jiva*” in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism) lives on and is incarnated into a new human body somewhere else here on earth.

¹⁷ See, for example, Anthony Quinton, “Spaces and Times,” *Philosophy* 37, no. 140 (1962): 130–47, <http://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100036792>, as well as other essays in the discussion that his essay generated. See, for example, K. Ward, “The Unity of Space and Time,” *Philosophy* 42, no. 159 (1967): 68–74, <http://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100000863> and R. G. Swinburne, “Times,” *Analysis* 25, no. 6 (1965): 185–91, <http://doi.org/10.1093/analysis/25.6.185>.

heavens and the earth? I do not know whether C&C believe in divine creation, but Christians do. We have no problem whatsoever with the idea of God, a non-physical being, interacting with energy. I thus conclude that this argument from C&C goes nowhere.

Second, C&C argue that it is only rational to believe a proposition if its probability is greater than 0.5. And, in the vast majority of cases, that is certainly true. But there is a kind of case where it is not true, where the rationality requirements are looser. Suppose we are trying to explain some phenomenon; there are four and only four mutually exclusive explanations, A, B, C, and D. Suppose that A, B, and C, so far as we can tell, each have a probability of 0.1 (and thus the probability that one of them is true has a probability of 0.3). And suppose that the probability of D is 4.5. This would doubtless be a case where much is unknown and more research is needed. But suppose further that, for some pragmatic reason, we must now choose one of the four. Then I would argue that it is rational to believe D.

But that is not my position on the resurrection of Jesus. C&C assert that “[Davis] thinks he is justified in believing R [that Jesus was raised] even though it has a low probability” (p. 50). I accept that the prior probability of the resurrection of Jesus is low. But assuming supernaturalism (as I do) together with the evidence and background information, I think the probability of R is well above 0.5.

VI

Toward the end of their paper, C&C range into biblical studies in support of the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is a legend. They argue that the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels are not credible. I will not comment on their arguments, although I believe they are answerable;¹⁸ I will just point out that I was puzzled why they felt the need to go there. They argue repeatedly that SM, *by itself*, entails that Jesus was not raised from the dead. If they are correct about that—and I still find it breathtaking that believe it—there is no need at all to consider evidence.

Natural laws do not cause, force, or require things to happen, like a king or legislature. They allow us to expect or predict what will very probably

¹⁸ See Stephen T. Davis, “The Gospels are Reliable as Historically Factual Accounts,” in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland and Chad Meister, trans. Khaldoun A. Sweis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 417–29 and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

happen. Physicists, these days, are searching for a “theory of everything” (TOE), a grand theoretical framework that will combine general relativity (gravity) and quantum field theory. It will be stronger than SM. It will, so they hope, be able to explain everything. But not even that theory, once achieved, will rule out the possibility of God, miracles, or the resurrection.

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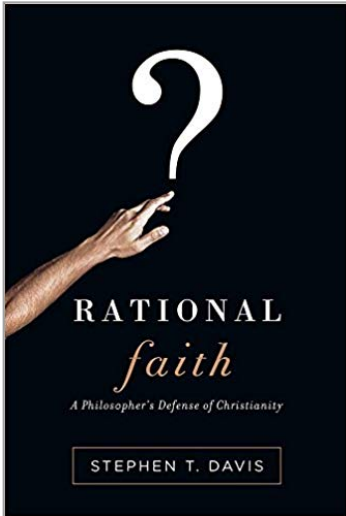
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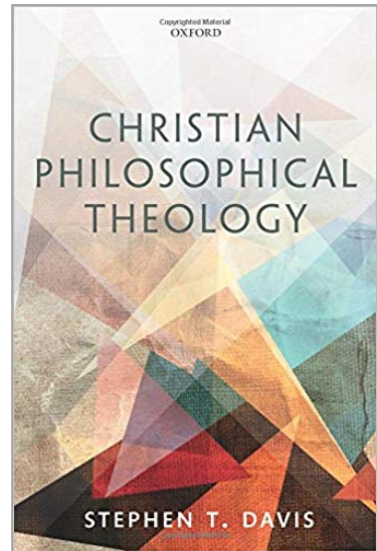
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